DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 989 JC 890 495

AUTHOR	Kliman, Bernice W.
TITLE	A Time To Think about Shakespeare.
PUB DATE	10 Nov 89
NOTE	10p.; Presented at the Meeting of the Community College Humanities Association (Washington, DC, November 9-11, 1989).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Colleges; *Discussion Groups; *English Literature; *Faculty Development; *Group Experience; Inservice Teacher Education; Introductory Courses; Scholarship; *Teacher Improvement; Teacher Workshops; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	*Nassau Community College NY; *Shakespeare (William)

ABSTRACT

In June 1989, a study group was organized at Nassau Community College to encourage faculty to introduce the works of William Shakespeare in introductory literature courses. When the prospect of teaching Shakespeare to community college students was first considered, faculty expressed concern that their understanding of the issues surrounding Shakespearean studies was not current; that their time commitments would not allow them to update their knowledge; that their last attempts to teach Shakespeare had been unsuccessful; and that they needed assistance to branch out to more unfamiliar plays. The Shakespeare project was initiated to address these concerns. The first part of the project was the formation of a study group, which met for over 60 hours in June 1989. Each week, a Master Mentor directed the study of a different play. The participants were placed in the position of students and assigned individual and group tasks. For example, during the first week, the study group was divided into four smaller groups, who were each assigned scenes from "Hamlet" to perform in any way they chose. Intense discussions arose from the choices and interpretations of the groups. After the scenes were performed and discussed, the Master Mentor raised "essential" questions about the play that had no definitive answers, entering into discussions with information and his own interpretations only as appropriate. As a result, many instructors used the discussion group approach in their classes, having students perform scenes and raising similar kinds of open questions. (JMC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED311989

A Time to Think About Shakespeare

by Bernice W. Kliman

November 10, 1989

JC 890 495

Paper Presented for the Great Books Session at the Conference of the Community Humanities Association (Washington, DC, November 9-11, 1989).

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. W. Kliman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Nassau Community College
Garden City, New York 11530-6793
Bernice W. Kliman—Department of English—(516) 222-7185, 7177

"A Time to Think About Shakespeare": NEH Study Group
For the Great Books Session at CCHA
Nov. 10, 1989, Washington, DC

This semester at Nassau Community College, the English Department has whirled with Shakespeare activities, thanks to the enthusiasm of the department and especially those who last June attended a three-week long study group at NCC entitled "A Time to Think About Shakespeare," which was sponsored by an NEH grant. And thanks to Gail Chapman, a colleague who was selected to coordinate the fall activities of the study group. Today, I am going to tell you some of the reasons we wanted the study group, how it worked and what has happened in our department so far as a result. The main connection to this particular session is that a study group like ours encourages community college faculty to introduce great works into introductory courses.

Though the general structure of our project might have been used for other works, for us in the English Department, focusing on Shakespeare was an important choice, because Shakespeare is something that we have in common, no matter what our individual specialities may be. We all probably have taught a Shakespeare play in the intro in lit course at some time, even if we have given it up in recent years.

These are some of the statements made by members of the department last year when they thought about teaching Shakespeare to our students; I am paraphrasing from the grant proposal:

- We agreed that Shakespeare should be part of the canon, yet we were concerned that our understanding of the issues surrounding Shakespeare studies is not current.
- We felt distant from our own graduate training in Shakespeare and thus many of us did not know how new critical theories could affect our thinking about and our teaching of Shakespeare;

- For most of us, the pressure of teaching four classes each semester did not and does not allow us the leisure to keep up with Shakespeare scholarship and to think about new teaching strategies;
- Several of us, with academic interests in non-Shakespearean areas, have a difficult enough time keeping up with new ideas in our own disciplines, yet we all value Shakespeare and want to teach the plays from a position of intellectual strength.
- Some of us used to include at least one Shakespeare play in our survey courses but more recently have found our students unable to handle it; we needed some help to try again;
- Several of us who have taught one or two plays wanted to branch out to more unfamiliar plays, but did not know how to proceed with certainty;
- Several of us wanted to make connections between Shakespeare and contemporary concerns;
- Some of us hoped to teach a CORE course and think Shakespeare should be part of such courses;
- All of us needed a concerned group of colleagues, including experts in the field, to share the experience of the study group, to whom we might turn to discuss our ideas in the future.

The Shakespeare project attempts to address these concerns.

The first part of the project was the study group, which met for over 60 hours in June 1989, providing the intellectual basis for the revitalization of our teaching of Shakespeare. There were twenty-five of us from English, out of a faculty of over 70, and one from the Theatre Department. We met daily in formal sessions from 10:00 to 2:00. In addition, we met in small groups before and after the formal sessions. Each week, a Master Mentor directed the activities of the study group, assigning individual and group tasks. They were Maurice Charney of Rutgers, Ralph Cohen of James Madison, and Lynda Boose of Dartmouth. Each week a different play or plays was the focus of attention: *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Winter's Tale*, and *Tempest*. In addition, three other scholars worked with us for three or

more hours each week on particular issues (James Lusardi of Lafayette College on video performance, Abbe Blum of Swarthmore on post new-critical concerns as they connect with performance and on non-authoritarian teaching, and Harry Keyishian of Fairleigh Dickinson on actors in the classroom).

Since then, each participant has undertaken a project with one of the master mentors, or a demonstration to which he or she has invited or will invite observers from the department, or a presentation at a departmental workshop or at a college program honoring Shakespeare.

During the three-week study group, we did not focus specifically on teaching, but many compelling ideas about teaching emerged. To back track for a moment: Starting some three years before the study group, an NCC project sponsored by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) developed interdisciplinary faculty development seminars that ***do*** focus particularly on teaching—especially on giving students a more active role in the classroom, more responsibility with more rigorous, college-level material. The idea for a Shakespeare study group grew out of my interest in working on these teaching ideas within a single discipline. We in the Shakespeare study group were placed in the position of students by our master mentors and we were assigned tasks that demonstrated to us what can be accomplished through groupwork and through discussions that arise out of an intense scrutiny of the plays. Faculty realized that these same techniques would work in their own classrooms.

An example from our first week, which was directed by Maurice Charney, Distinguished Professor of English at Rutgers, a wonderful model of superior teaching: Maurice asked that we divide into four groups before the beginning of the June study group and assigned each group two scenes to perform. Each group had part of a day to perform two segments in any way they chose or in alternative ways. The discussions that arose from the choices the small groups had to make, it turned out, were often where the most intense learning took place. As teachers, we often had developed *an* interpretation of *Hamlet*, based on our own reading of the play or that of our professors. Now, working with six or seven peers, we learned that our

individual interpretation was not shared by all the others; we were led to argue for our positions and to value the interpretations of others. When we saw that so many performances of the segments of *Hamlet* were valid, we were forced to confront the openness of the texts, to recognize that the texts are blueprints for performance that leave many decisions to the actors, directors and designers of productions.

After the short segments were performed, Maurice asked us questions—and they were true questions, not just questions that he had answers to and that he wanted us to answer in a particular way. Often, they were **essential** questions about *Hamlet* that had no definitive answers at all. For example, one group performed a scene in which there were two Hamlets, with two personalities. As we explored the justification for each of the overlapping portrayals, we looked for ways that actors could combine the two—or ways that the two kinds of Hamlets might turn up in other scenes. Later in the week, we had a very moving performance of the gravedigger's scene, and for many of us there was something about the manner the scene was presented that made it—in a way that was new to us—one of the most important scenes in the play. With Maurice, we thought about why the scene had been as moving as it had been. He always made all of us feel that our responses and that our discussions were stimulating to him. We flourished under Maurice's tutelage because he did not impose *his* interpretations on our exploration. Though he has written two books on *Hamlet*, he let us feel that we could change his interpretations, persuade *him* to see *Hamlet* in yet another way. The air was electric with the possibility for discovery, and we became as impressed with each other as with him.

To his openness he added, of course, a formidable body of knowledge, which, however, never weighed upon us too heavily. Rather, he always entered the discussion with information and his own interpretation when the moment seemed appropriate. He conducted our sessions without needing to prove something about himself. The goal always appeared to be more insight into Shakespeare and teaching. As teachers, I think many of us want to emulate Maurice and create this spirit in our classrooms.

Thus, many of us have determined to have our students work in discussion groups, to have them perform scenes in class, and to introduce the same kind of open questions that Maurice asked. Though much of the activity centered on our contributions, we realize how important Maurice's contribution was—mainly, his selection of the scenes for close study, his questions, and the productive way he accepted everyone's answers. He helped us see that we need not "cover" the play in the old ways, that is, by starting at the beginning and working relentlessly through to the end. He freed us from thinking primarily in terms of plot by beginning with a scene from the second act. Our felt need to cover the plays in this way, in fact, had been precisely what had kept many of us from teaching them. His methods will work—have worked—for us in other courses of study as well.

The three weeks continued in this splendid way. Some of the highlights—my own personal memorable moments:

- Three groups performing movingly spiritual or skeptically cynical versions of the coming to life of the statue in *Winter's Tale*. Abbe Blum had us confront, as Method actors do, our own feelings of loss, then had the cynical group perform again, with entirely different results.

- James Lusardi showing us how to use videotapes in the classroom. During the three weeks, we always had video equipment and videotapes on hand for people to watch after our regular sessions. (I have a three-page handout for student and video performances in the classroom.)

- Harry Keyishian having us read around the circle one sentence each, then one line each, then one word each—to show that students can read the text in this way, can learn to "hand" their bit on to the next person reading, can begin to feel comfortable with the language.

- Ralph Cohen having us do three different performances of the scene in which Cleopatra learns from a messenger that Antony has married Fulvia: Our three group members who played Cleopatra had completely different interpretations of her; we realize that an ideal

Cleopatra would encompass all of these and more, and our three performances gave us a better appreciation of her multiplicity.

- Paulina putting makeup on a nervous Hermione before they set her up as a statue.
- Our groups' creativity in devising setting, props and costumes from the materials at hand. For instance, a lectern on its side became a grave, a tablecloth Cleopatra's queenly garments, a belt a leash for Caliban.
- Actors performing Miranda and Ferdinand for us during our last session with such evident joy in the language that they reinforced our commitment to the work.
- Lynda Boose's gift of a choice library of current critical literature. She established a collection in honored memory of Bernard Beckerman, the Shakespeare performance scholar, through whose NEH Institute at the Folger Library she became aware of the potential for performance-oriented scholarship and teaching.

I could go on and on.

The readings that the mentors and guest consultants assigned have been important in widening our knowledge of new critical currents. Most of us, however, prefer to teach using the close readings of the scenes that performance work entails rather than assign critical literature to students. Our own reading, nevertheless, helps us to become more assured teachers.

As a result of the study group, we had a wonderful time, got to know each other in a way that we had never had time for before, and our morale improved. We achieved our main aim: Most who responded to the end-questionnaire said that their feelings about including a Shakespeare play in the introduction to literature course had changed, that they now will try it or will do it more readily and happily. One of these people had not taught a Shakespeare play for 15 years! Another had never taught a Shakespeare play in Comp II. One of us whose main responsibility is ESL has added Shakespeare to his syllabus, with excellent results. Others who responded to this question already felt strongly about including a play but now have learned new ways to do it.

A typical comment: "I'm now better equipped, not only to deal with the students' resistance to Shakespeare, but to make the plays interesting, thought-provoking, and FUN!" One participant described the discussions as "informed, sustained, and serious, and loving of each other and of reading and thinking.' Another mentioned her "renewed sense of Shakespeare's greatness—the fertility of his mind, the range of human characters he shows us. Performing the roles, amateurs though we are, deepened this sense immeasurably."

Asked about which of the activities they had engaged in they might use with their students, almost all participants were sure that the activities would be useful in the classroom. Many saw opportunities to use the activities with other literature.

And the spirit goes on:

In July, we held a reunion, and we did a reading of Tom Stoppard's *Hamlet* in his play *Dogg's Hamlet*.

In the semester since the study group, numerous activities have been generated:

- Colleagues have invited others into their classrooms to see how they are teaching Shakespeare.
- A demonstration of groupwork and scene work has been presented to the FIPSE seminar group to spread ideas about teaching great works to non-English faculty.
- Workshops to discuss particular scenes have been held.
- A group is working on a presentation of *Pyramus and Thisbe* to the whole department at the annual Christmas party, which is devoted to Shakespeare and will also feature songs from Shakespeare's time.
- A weekly newsletter is distributed to all the members of the department to inform them about productions of Shakespeare plays in the area, to announce study group activities, and to carry invitations for classroom visits, etc. (I have a sample of two of these to distribute here.)
- Reports from those who have already tried a Shakespeare play in their classes have been very positive.

- Plans for the future include a return of Maurice Charney speaking about *Hamlet* in honor of Shakespeare's birthday and the continuation of acting groups, reading groups, groups discussing critical literature, and more.

In sum, a study group is a wonderful opportunity to reinforce a faculty's wish to teach great books. We *burdened* community college teachers need time, and we need a community of those who share our aspirations. A study group provides both. We are grateful to NEH and our College for giving us this opportunity to grow as teachers.

ERIC Clearinghouse for
Junior Colleges DEC 08 1989